DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 391 IR 051 734

TITLE	Statement of the Special Libraries Association on the Department of Commerce Solicitation of Public Comment on the Study of Alternatives for Privatizing the National Technical Information Service.
INSTITUTION	Special Libraries Association, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2 Jun 86
NOTE	5p.
PUB TYPE	Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Information; Database Producers; Databases; *Government Publications; *Government Role; *Information Dissemination; Private Agencies; Public Agencies; *Scientific and Technical Information; User Needs (Information)
IDENTIFIERS	*National Technical Information Service; *Private Sector

ABSTRACT

In this response to the issues and alternatives for the proposed privatization of the National Technical Information Service (NTIS) as presented in the "Federal Register" of April 28, 1986, the Special Libraries Association (SLA) rejects outright the proposal to privatize all of its functions, and expresses its preference for keeping NTIS intact. Responses to individual points made in the proposal emphasize the strengths of NTIS as a one-stop source for government information and the nation's major source point for the acquisition and dissemination of government research and development reports. Some of the implications of privatization are also discussed, e.g., the issue of copyright versus public domain for government reports, the prerogative of agencies to make the initial distribution of reports, and the availability of government publications through the depository library program. Additional issues discussed include public access to information created or collected using public funds, the role of NTIS as a coordinator for cooperative efforts among the major technical reports processing agencies, and the need for continuity in the monitoring of federal research in progress. (KM)

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Statement of the

SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION

on the

Department of Commerce

Solicitation of Public Comment

on the Study of Alternatives for Privatizing

the

National Technical Information Service

June 2, 1986

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The Special Libraries Association is an international organization of more than 12,500 librarians, information managers, and brokers. Special libraries serve industry, business, research, educational and technical agencies, government, special departments of public and university libraries, newspaper, museums and other organizations both in for-profit and not-for-profit sectors, requiring specialized information. The Association and its members are concerned with the advancement and improvement of communications and the dissemination and ultimate use of information and knowledge for the general welfare of all users.

Our Association appreciates this opportunity for those of us in the library and information community to discuss the proposal to privatize the National Technical Information Service. We commend NTIS for soliciting public comments and trust that there will be public hearings. The Special Libraries Association would like to participate in such a forum.

We submit the following specific comments in response to the "Privatization Issues" and "Privatization Alternatives" posed in the Federal Register of April 28, 1986.

Comments Relating to Privatization Issues

1. The NTIS operation works now, even though federal agencies are not obligated to place their reports in the system. Users tend to agree that the information available through NTIS is adequate. Any legislation to compel agencies to place their reports with a privatized NTIS would be met with great opposition and viewed as another example of over-regulation by the federal government.

2. NTIS manages a number of special programs which are best handled by the federal government, such as licensing of government patents and negotiating with foreign sources for the exchange of technical information. The role of the government in these instances cannot be minimized and must continue. A private entity would not have the type of access to foreign sources that the federal government does.

3. The concept of having some NTIS functions partially performed is not realistic and could lead to a duplication of efforts.

4. The federal government's role in maintaining a permanent collection at NTIS must continue. There has to be available scientific and technical data in order for users to track research and progress. Without access to past studies and reports, researchers may be left to "reinvent the wheel."

5. Copyright protection should not be conferred to any private entity for information which has been generated by government funds. Literature paid for by government funds is in the public domain.

This principle must be protected and continued.

6. The prerogative of agencies to make the initial distribution of reports is an important link in the flow of scientific information. The source agency should continue this practice regardless of whether NTIS is privatized or not.

7. If NTIS were sold, be it to one or several entities, regard must be given to the company or companies involved. What if a foreign concern were involved? In addition, the government must be able to regulate the price scales for the cost of documents as well as access and distribution.

8. One reason NTIS has operated a successful program is that it has served as a one-stop source for government information. Users are satisfied with the available services. It should continue to serve as the nation's major source point for the acquisition and dissemination of goverment research and development reports.

9 In many cases a library, which purchases a document from NTIS, is not necessarily the end-user. Specifically, the D.H. Hill Library at North Carolina State University disseminates reports it obtains from NTIS to its borrowing community including private research facilities, research institutions, federal government agencies as well as students and faculty on the campus.

10. The government has a siginificant stake in maintaining the security of information collected by NTIS. Government information is an essential tool for managing the government's operations, for providing the basis for sound business decisions in the private sector, for providing citizens with knowledge of their society and is a resource whose value -- economic, social and personal -- is intangible. It is a resource which is necessary for the management of all other tangible resources.

Comments Relating to Privatization Alternatives

1&2. The Special Libraries Association rejects outright the proposal to privatize all of NTIS' functions. We, therefore, cannot support the first two alternatives.

3. If some portions of NTIS are sold, there must be certain safeguards by the government to ensure continued user access to information or threats to national security.

4. We would prefer keeping NTIS intact. However, the option of contracting out some functions is preferable to its outright sale.

5. The option of a public or quasi-public corporation has merit and is worth studying. It would allow continued

government control over national security and defense information, and could keep the price structure reasonable.

Additional Issues

1. Since the most expensive aspect of information--its creation or collection--is accomplished with public money, the public should continue to have access to this information through the statutorily mandated depository library program. Special libraries rely on the current dissemination framework which ensures equal access to government data, especially through depository libraries.

   Should NTIS be privatized, what obligation would there be to deposit copies of government publications in depository libraries?

2. NTIS now serves as a coordinator for cooperative efforts among the major technical reports processing agencies such as NASA, DOE and sometimes GPO, to standardize input, share resources and in many cases, reduce costs to the government by announcing processing and distributing government publications. This function should continue.

3. The application of user charges or higher prices by the private sector to recover the costs of disseminating government information must be evaluated carefully. Otherwise, a basic right of the nation's citizens to be informed will be violated. Additionally, there is the argument that the public has paid for the government information by their tax dollars.

4. NTIS currently operates the Federal Research in Progress (FEDRIP) Program. It is vital that this function continue under NTIS auspices to ensure continuity and user accessibility.

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The value of government information to the government is not solely a function of the degree to which it contributes to achieving a specific agency's mission. Rather, government information is essential for making sound decisions to enhance the quality of life of the nation as well as to strengthen its economic structure and its national defense. The government also has a responsibility for maintaining a recorded history of this nation's progress and accomplishments.